that. It is of no importance if we spend a day to two longer than usual on the journey. I would prefer that than having you overtax your strength too soon.

"I'll remember," Kirk promised, inwardly determined to prove his stamina.

They set off at sunrise, to begin the journey before the rising sun burned the early freshness from the air. As the camp vanished behind them, Kirk gave an unconscious sigh of pleasure as he surveyed the landscape ahead. After his long confinement to the immediate area of the camp, the vast open space ahead lured him with the prospect of new adventures. From the map he knew that they were skirting the edge of the Red Desert, so-called from the color of the harsh sand. Ahead of them towered the craggy peaks of a mountain range, but on this trip they would not be required to climb. After four days they would turn from the direct path down through the rich farmlands of the Langoc valley toward the city of ShiKahr and the home of Spock's family.

As he had promised, Spock allowed Kirk to set their pace for the day, noting with approval that the Human called a halt during the heat of the day. Kirk had sensibly taken account of his greater vulnerability to the climate and had not, as the Vulcan had half feared he might, striven to impress by carrying on under difficult conditions. Instead he showed that his survival lessons had been well learned, improvising a shelter by using their desert cloaks to provide some shade from the blazing sun. Only when the heat had abated slightly did he indicate his readiness to move on, following the course he had set that morning.

Despite the heat, Kirk enjoyed the ride. His mount was one of the powerful stallions ridden by the warriors, their equipment carried by the pack beast that would have been his had he still been merely a pleasure slave. On Earth, riding had been one of his favorite occupations, and he had spent many holidays in the saddle, exploring the wild areas of countryside that remained unsettled by man after the ravages of the Eugenics Wars; though this was not his world, and the Vulcan animals differed in some ways from the horses he was used to, he quickly fell into the old rhythm, adjusting quickly to the fact that his mount responded to spoken commands rather than the hand and leg signals he was used to.

They made good time for the remainder of the day, halting for the night at a small oasis which had been marked on Spock's chart. Kirk glanced around appreciatively as he dismounted, finding the cool green of the desert plants a welcome relief after the harsh glare of the red sand.

The first task was to care for their mounts, and with this Spock was prepared to help. A warrion in camp was attended in all things by slaves, but on a journey each understood the importance of caring first for the animals on which their lives could depend.

Kirk led his stallion to the water hole, and stood watching as the beast quenched its thirst. The water looked cool and inviting, and he wondered if he would be allowed to swim.

"You may," Spock answered his unspoken question, seeing the longing in the Human's eyes with understanding. "I know this oasis. The water in the pool is fed and drained by underground streams. Prepare food while I see to the animals, then we will both bathe before we eat."

Kirk obeyed, building a fire as he had been shown, and setting their food to cook. He then smoothed a patch of ground and laid out the bedding they had brought. This consisted of a light, warm sleeping bag large enough for them both. It was, after all, the duty of a slave to warm his master in the cold of the desert night.

By the time they had eaten, and Kirk had cleared the remains of the meal, he was very tired. He sat down on the cover and Spock knelt beside him, touching him lightly. He wondered if the Vulcan would require his services. For a moment the dark eyes surveyed him, then unexpectedly the Vulcan smiled, caught his arm, and pulled him in beside him.

"For tonight, you may sleep," the soft voice murmured. "I think that you are too weary to be responsive, Jim."

"Yes, I am," Kirk admitted, wondering with a shudder what Savak's response would have been to a suggestion that his slave needed rest. "It's only because I'm still a little of condition," he added hastily.

Spock's only response was a faint smile as he pulled the Human closer, lifting the fair head to his shoulder. Sleepily, Kirk snuggled into the warmth of the body pressed to his, and closed his eyes.

Dawn found them already preparing to move on. Kirk was loading the pack beast while Spock refilled the water bottles from the pool. As Jim bent to lift the last pack into place he winced slightly, then grinned. Spock might have let him sleep last night, but he had certainly made up for lost time this morning. If Humans were valued for their sensuality, he thought, Vulcans could take credit for more than their share of stamina. He wondered what it would take to sate Spock completely and hoped that he would never have to find out.

Settling the pack into place, Kirk turned to saddle his mount, when a cry of warning from Spock brought him around to see the Vulcan surrounded by a band of roughly dressed men. He started forward cursing the fact that his sword was out of reach, but a hand caught his shoulder, swinging him around

"Stay, lad. You're free now."

His captor was a Human male in his forties. His dark hair and beard were grizzled, his tanned face deeply seamed, his body lean and tough. A slave collar encircled his neck.

"My name is Foster, all my men are former slaves." He smiled reassuringly. "All of us escaped from our masters, and we have a base in the mountains. Lucky for you we stopped here. We've been raiding the villages beyond the desert."

"We've got him, Foster!" one of the men called, and Kirk looked round to see that Spock, overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers, was being expertly bound hand and foot.

"Be right with you, Tyno. Come and have a look at him, lad. He's not so dangerous now."

Kirk followed Foster over to the group, noting that many of the slaves showed signs that the Vulcan had not been easily overcome. Spock looked up at him expressionlessly, green blood running down his face from a cut on his temple.